

Sri Lankan SEP holds public meeting: How to fight the new Rajapakse regime

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a powerful public meeting at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium on Sunday to discuss the socialist strategy for workers to fight the austerity policies and state repression of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government. About 150 workers, youth, professionals and housewives, from Colombo and its outskirts, as well as delegations from the war-ravaged northern Jaffna Peninsula and the central plantation district, attended the event.

SEP political committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena, the party's presidential candidate in the November election, chaired the meeting. He reviewed how Rajapakse had established his minority government and said it confirmed the party's warnings about his moves towards dictatorial forms of rule. Rajapakse replaced Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the United National Party leader, with his brother, the former President Mahinda Rajapakse, and appointed former military officers to head several government institutions, including the Defence Ministry.

Wijesiriwardena also pointed to the eruption of plantation workers' struggles against speed-ups and poverty wages, within days of Rajapakse coming to power. He warned that other sections of the working class would quickly come into conflict with Colombo's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures.

Addressing the meeting, IYSSE convener Kapila Fernando explained that Rajapakse's declared aim of repealing the 19th amendment to the constitution, which curtailed some of the president's powers, was aimed at unleashing authoritarian attacks against the working class. He warned that the Inter University Students Federation, which is politically led by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), was spreading dangerous illusions that student protests could pressure the government to address the issues confronting the country's younger generation.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, the final speaker, told the audience that the fight against austerity and state repression was not a national issue, but confronted workers

in every part of the globe. It required, he insisted, a socialist international perspective.

Dias referred to the US assassination of Iranian General Suleimani and said it signified the desperate efforts of US imperialism to maintain its global hegemony. The post-Second World War global order established under US leadership, he said, "is in a shambles" with all the major powers and the governments of former colonies confronting the popular opposition of workers and youth.

"Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected to power, for a second term, and with a big majority, only eight months ago. While the two Stalinist Communist Parties and all the fake lefts in India were astounded by Modi's victory, only our movement explained that the reason for his re-election was the political spinelessness of the traditional alternative bourgeois party, the Congress party, and the long time class collaborationist Stalinist, Maoist and other so-called radicals and trade unions."

The January 8 general strike by millions of workers against Modi's austerity policies and communal reaction, he continued, was cutting across racial, religious, caste and gender divisions. "The potential for unified anti-capitalist struggles, under the leadership of the working class, is amply expressed in this development," Dias added.

"It is only eight weeks since Rajapakse was elected as president in Sri Lanka," he said, and pointed out that although the opposition UNP and the left parties and trade unions "are mesmerized by Rajapakse's majority, the signs of deep-going disaffection are already emerging among broad sections of workers and the rural poor."

"It will not be long before the workers' struggles and protests of poor farmers and youth, which unified the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities in 2018–19 against the former Sirisena and Wickremesinghe government, are revived. It is to preempt such a development that Rajapakse is resorting to Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism, the strengthening of the armed forces and militarisation of the state bureaucracy."

The speaker reviewed the escalating financial crisis facing

Sri Lankan capitalism, and said that although the government was delaying harsher austerity measures until after the forthcoming April elections, skyrocketing prices in all essential food items and the destruction of over 10,000 jobs since Rajapakse became president, would bring workers into sharp conflict with the new regime.

Wars and social and political counter-revolutions, he continued, emerge because capitalism has no other solutions to the contradictions of the profit system. The productive forces had developed to such a level that they could not be contained, or further developed peacefully, under capitalist ownership and the nation state system.

“During the last century, the world witnessed two imperialist wars, but no long-term solution to these contradictions. There has not been a single day, in the last two decades of the new millennium, that the US was not at war with one country or another. After becoming US president, Trump has brought the world to the brink of nuclear war by threatening North Korea and Iran,” he said.

“It is a proven fact of history that no amount of humanitarian appeals will stop the imperialist ruling elites from waging war,” Dias said, noting the pathetic calls of the FSP and other fake lefts for the US to end its aggression against Iran and withdraw from the Middle East.

The speaker said that the historic task of rescuing mankind from nuclear annihilation rested solely with the international working class, supported by the multi-millioned toilers. Dias then reviewed the revolutionary internationalist program outlined in “The decade of socialist revolution begins,” the *World Socialist Web Site* Perspective published on January 3.

Dias referred to the revolutionary struggles that have convulsed the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America and elsewhere during the last decade, and the more recent “Yellow Vest” movement of French workers and youth, auto workers and teachers in the US.

The speaker quoted from the WSWs Perspective: “The growth of the working class and the emergence of class struggle on an international scale is the objective basis for revolution. However, the spontaneous struggles of workers and their instinctive striving for socialism is, by itself, inadequate. The transformation of the class struggle into a conscious movement for socialism is a question of political leadership.”

This political leadership, Dias explained, required an internationalist party that embodied the historical and international strategic experiences of the class struggle of the last century, up to the present period. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), he said, was the repository of those lessons.

“The SEP as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, is

dedicated to carrying these lessons to the working people of Sri Lanka and South Asia. Our struggle is to unify the working class of this region, cutting across the linguistic, racial, religious and other archaic divisions consciously maintained and aroused by the ruling elites to divide and oppress the working people, and betray them again to colonial aggression and subjugation...

“The growth of the working class in all the historically under-developed countries has laid the basis for international class unity at a level unprecedented in history. The ICFI and the WSWs are striving to make this decade of socialist revolution a victorious one.”

Acclaimed writer Shakthika Sathkumara was among those attending the Colombo meeting. Sathkumara is being victimised by the Sri Lankan authorities, under bogus charges of defaming Buddhism.

After the meeting, Sathkumara spoke to the WSWs: “The real situation on a global level was clearly explained.

“What happened in India under Modi’s rule, within eight months, has happened here in Sri Lanka in just eight weeks. Drawing the parallels with Indian developments is remarkable, and the argument that we need an international solution is logical. This movement must be brought more into the youth and built.”

Vimukthi, a Toyota Lanka casual worker, said: “The government always talks about the development of the country, but the living conditions of workers and the poor are deteriorating daily. It’s so clear to me that this government’s boasting about ‘building the country’ is bogus.

“The harsh conditions faced by workers all over the world are similar, that’s why the working class must stand together internationally. One of the main problems faced by the working class is their unawareness of the depth of the capitalist crisis... Workers need to be well aware of the situation facing workers in other countries, because this will provide their urge to fight the capitalist system. I learnt this from the meeting, and especially about the situation in India, and understood that the working class has both the necessity and the ability to challenge the capitalist system.”



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