

# Sri Lankan SEP holds online meeting on COVID-19 pandemic

Our reporters  
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On April 7, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a powerful online meeting entitled “The COVID-19 pandemic and capitalist barbarism” on the party’s Facebook page.

The event was addressed by leading members of the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. So far, it has been viewed by over 1,100 people and shared by more than 50 Facebook users. We are publishing below an edited version of SEP General Secretary Wije Dias’s speech, which was delivered in Sinhalese and translated live into Tamil.

Dias began his remarks by quoting from an April 1 WSWs Perspective headlined “The working class, socialism and the fight against pandemic” written by David North, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board chairman.

North wrote: “The characteristic of every great crisis is that it lays bare the contradictions that have accumulated and been suppressed for decades. All that is backward, anachronistic, corrupt, and, in the most profoundly objective sense, absurd and even irrational in the economic organisation, social structure, political leadership and dominant ideology of the existing society is brutally and comprehensively exposed.”

Dias told the meeting it was important to grasp the significance and implications of the exposure of these four factors.

“First, economic organisation: We live in a global capitalist system of production and distribution. We are all witnessing today that this system is undergoing a breakdown on a global scale.

“Factories, plantations, banks and businesses are closed and the means of living for the vast majority of the population has been sharply restricted, if they have not yet come to a complete halt. Many are deprived of essential consumer goods. Entire towns, districts and provinces have been locked down.

“President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government is bogusly claiming that village agriculture in Sri Lanka is immune from this situation, but the equipment, fertilisers and chemicals needed for the sector are scarce. Peasants find it difficult to sell even their meagre produce. The World Food Organisation predicts that the whole world will face drastic food shortages in the coming months. International economic relations and trade agreements have become unviable.

“Instead of global collaboration to eradicate COVID-9, the ruling elites have turned more and more to nationalist economic programs. Under the Trump administration, the US economic war against China is being intensified and American sanctions are being tightened against several countries, including Iran.

“With many countries unable to maintain their exports, the Sri Lankan garment industry has totally collapsed, resulting in job losses for tens of thousands of workers. The Rajapakse government is curtailing imports due to its increasing trade deficit, and vehicle imports have been completely stopped.

“Under these conditions, a totally unrealistic myth of self-sufficiency is being peddled by the Rajapakse government by reintroducing the long-abandoned ‘Grow Your Own Food’ program.

“The social structures to which David North refers are no different. Under capitalism, the capitalist class owns all production and distribution, with the workers expending their labour in the production process. But even before the coronavirus pandemic, the capitalist economic system was in a protracted breakdown. This was signalled by the global financial crisis in 2008.

“Responding to the global financial disaster, massive funds were provided to the same parasitic financial oligarchs centrally responsible for the crisis. This paved the way for an unprecedented growth in the wealth and number of billionaires. The wealth of the top 500

billionaires today is equivalent to the value of the GDP [gross domestic product] of all countries, apart from just 15, in the world.

“Despite this unprecedented social polarisation, the reformists and pseudo-lefts maintained their embrace of the capitalist order and all its social counter-revolutionary measures. The treachery of these so-called lefts, including the Stalinists, is also ‘cruelly’ exposed under the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Not since the first and second world wars has world humanity been confronted by the sort of devastation created by the capitalist rulers who have allowed the spread of the coronavirus. The working class, which the post-modernists and the identity politics movements tried to erase from history, has started to reemerge as a decisive social force.

“The third issue is political leadership and what the coronavirus crisis exposes about the bourgeoisie. The Rajapakse government has amply revealed its draconian character by elevating the military, which butchered tens of thousands of innocent Tamil men, women and children during the 30-year communal war, into the top echelons of civil administration. This too is a worldwide phenomenon. Faced with an economic and social crisis and rising class struggles, the ruling classes have realised that they cannot maintain their rule in the old way...

“The absence of an adequate public health service is the result of austerity programs dictated by the IMF [International Monetary Fund]. A pittance is allocated for the vital social rights of the masses, such as education and health, while unlimited sums are spent on the military by the capitalist ruling classes in every country.”

Dias explained the reactionary role played by the trade unions and their complete failure to advance any progressive solution to the COVID-19 pandemic or to provide the basic social needs for the working class and the broad masses.

The speaker noted the relevance of the founding program of the Fourth International and its statement: “Without a socialist revolution, in the next period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind. The turn is now to the proletariat.”

Dias outlined the SEP’s immediate transitional demands:

- \* The implementation of universal testing for coronavirus in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.

- \* The immediate provision of well-equipped hospital facilities, with the necessary protective gear for healthcare staff.

- \* Take profiteering out of health services. Provide free health services to all.

- \* Guarantee jobs for all workers. Fully-paid leave must be provided to those workers in industries and other enterprises forced to close.

- \* Nationalisation of all large corporations and big businesses without compensation under the democratic control of workers.

- \* Global committees of experts for a collective effort to utilise scientific and technological knowhow to eradicate the coronavirus and other such pandemics.

- \* The immediate ending of expenditures on war preparations and military material.

- \* Stop servicing the foreign debt.

Dias said the capitalist class and its political henchmen would undoubtedly claim that this program is unrealistic and there is no money. He referred to what Leon Trotsky told the French workers in 1935: “This is why the most immediate of all demands must be for the expropriation of the capitalists and the nationalisation of the means of production. But is not this demand unrealisable under the rule of the bourgeoisie? Quite so! That is why we must seize power.”

The speaker explained that the program advanced by the SEP is an indivisible component of the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government—a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

“Arming the working class and the oppressed masses with a transitional program is to bridge the gap between the present consciousness of the working people and youth and the political consciousness needed for the historical revolutionary tasks,” Dias said.

“The organisational form to facilitate the carrying out of the struggle for these tasks is the formation of Action Committees in workplaces and neighborhoods. More than ever, the building of the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, as a mass party is a burning necessity.”



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