

Sri Lankan SEP holds online lecture on how to fight Rajapakse's dictatorial moves

Our correspondents
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On Sunday September 6, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), held a successful online lecture entitled “A program to defeat the preparations for dictatorial rule.” About 70 people participated in the event, which was streamed on the party’s Facebook page, and has been viewed by over 14,000 people since then.

SEP Assistant Secretary Deepal Jayasekera chaired the lecture. He explained how President Gotabaya Rajapakse’s government, which won the August general election with a near two-thirds majority, is advancing its plans for dictatorial forms of rule. The government wants to repeal the 19th amendment to the country’s constitution, which imposed some limits on the president’s executive powers. It hopes to pass a 20th amendment, which will grant the president wide-ranging, anti-democratic powers.

Jayasekera reviewed the steps already taken by the government, including the appointment of retired or in-service military high rankers, as either ministry secretaries or heads of government institutions. “This is in response to strikes and other struggles by the working class and the oppressed masses that will inevitably erupt against the government’s austerity measures and have already been seen in actions taken in defence of jobs, wages and working conditions, and in defending social and democratic rights,” the speaker said.

Delivering the lecture, SEP Political Committee member Saman Gunadasa reviewed the SEP’s ongoing analysis of the class-war measures President Rajapakse had taken since coming to office in November, along with the party’s perspective for the working class and all those seeking to fight Rajapakse’s anti-democratic actions.

Gunadasa reviewed Rajapakse’s preparations for dictatorship, noting that, in addition to appointing retired and in-service army generals to key institutions, the president had established a Military Task Force, comprising the heads of the Tri-forces as well as intelligence and police chiefs, under the cover of “preventing anti-social activities.”

The speaker explained how all the constitutions since Sri Lanka’s formal independence, in 1948, have been used to attack the democratic rights of the masses, and especially of minorities. “The constitution took on dictatorial forms with the global collapse of the capitalist welfare state, in the late 1970s, along with all the other remnants of the post-war settlement.”

Gunadasa reviewed how United National Party (UNP) governments, under J.R. Jayawardena and R. Premadasa, utilised the presidential executive powers enshrined in Jayawardena’s 1978 constitution. These powers, he said, were used in July 1980 to smash the general strike, to launch, and continue, the communalist anti-Tamil war in 1983 and unleash the state massacre of about 60,000 youths in a bloody crackdown on rural unrest in 1988–89.

The speaker explained that rising mass opposition to the executive powers forced opposition parliamentary parties to promise the abolition of the executive presidency. When elected, however, these parties have utilised such powers to the maximum or, at best, placed minimal restrictions on them.

Gunadasa said the 20th amendment being proposed by the Rajapakse administration went even further than the repressive 1978 constitution. The president, he explained, wants to concentrate the executive, the legislature and the judiciary into a single centre of power.

“The government needs these powers to unleash an

onslaught against the working class, amidst the global economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While providing low interest rate credit facilities to big business, the government is taxing essential items, limiting imports and attacking working people and the poor,” he said.

The speaker outlined the dire economic situation confronting the country: “Sri Lanka is on the verge of defaulting, with over \$US4 billion needed annually to pay loan instalments over the next several years. Global rating agencies, such as Fitch and Moody’s, have already lowered the country’s rating, and the government is also requesting more funds from the IMF, which will entail even more brutal austerity measures.”

This is the background to Rajapakse’s calls for a “strong government,” which is being prepared in order to crush workers’ struggles and not only slash living standards, wages and retirement funds, but to destroy the remnants of free education and healthcare, and carry out the privatisation of public enterprises, Gunadasa explained.

The speaker reviewed the geo-political background to the Rajapakse government’s dictatorial plans, noting Colombo’s readiness to line up with the US and its regional allies, particularly India, in the military-strategic offensive against China. The government, he added, is preparing to sign a multi-million dollar Millennium Challenge Corporation agreement with the US, and to offer up the country as a backyard for Washington’s war preparations against China.

Gunadasa referred to a *Daily Mirror* interview with Rajapakse’s new foreign secretary, Admiral Jayantha Colombage, who said, “Sri Lanka will always have an India-first approach, and “will not do anything harmful to India’s strategic security interests.”

In addition, the US State Department reported a recent telephone conversation between US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Rajapakse, in which “both leaders expressed their commitment to expanding bilateral defense relations and to advancing shared interests.”

The speaker then explained the critical significance of the campaign launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International for the development of an anti-war movement of the international working class, against the growing danger of imperialist war.

“The international working class, the only social power capable of defeating war and the drive towards dictatorship, has already entered onto the political scene. This has been seen in the protests against the police assassination of George Floyd in the US, which have spread worldwide, and amidst the worsening COVID-19 pandemic, the rising mass opposition of teachers and students, to the dangerous reopening of schools, and health workers fighting unsafe working conditions, Gunadasa said.

The speaker pointed to recent walkouts and protests in Sri Lanka, noting strikes against privatisation by Colombo harbour workers, Colombo Port City workers against wage and job cuts, and the ongoing struggles by health workers, garment workers and public sector workers against layoffs and wage cuts.

Drawing lessons from the betrayals of those struggles by the trade unions, Gunadasa explained that the unions defend capitalism and fight to keep workers trapped within this system. “Workers must break this bondage and form their own independent action committees. These committees must mobilise the political and industrial strength of the workers and act as guiding organisations in the struggle for their independent demands,” he said.

“In this developing movement of the working class, the SEP is fighting for the socialist internationalist perspective outlined by Leon Trotsky in the building of the Fourth International. This is the only program for the working class to fight the dictatorial preparations being made by the Rajapakse government.”



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