SEP (Sri Lanka) outlines socialist alternative to pandemic and authoritarianism

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held an online meeting on October 28 to discuss the socialist program required to fight COVID-19, as the country experiences a new surge of the pandemic.

The event, titled: "The way forward for the working class amid the COVID-19 pandemic," was broadcast live on the party's Facebook page. It was viewed by an attentive audience, who participated in the discussion with comments and questions. The video has so far been viewed by more than 1,200 workers and young people, with 80 of them sharing it on their Facebook accounts.

Despite President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's bogus claims that his government had succeeded in containing the pandemic, COVID-19 infections have now spread throughout the country, threatening to overwhelm the rundown health system. As of this writing, confirmed cases are nearing 13,000 and 29 deaths have been reported.

Saman Gunadasa, an SEP Political Committee member who chaired the event, stated that the purpose of the meeting was not to make complaints to the authorities, but to provide the necessary leadership for the working class to fight the situation imposed by capitalist governments. He emphasized that to combat the pandemic, globally coordinated action is essential. Only the working class can organise such an effort, Gunadasa said, based on an international socialist program.

Displaying graphs from the Health Promotion Bureau, Gunadasa showed that the government kept PCR testing at a very low rate until October. This was increased, but only to a still inadequate level, after the coronavirus began spreading rapidly.

Instead of spending money on the healthcare of workers and the oppressed, Gunadasa explained that government efforts were focused on ensuring that big businesses continued to amass major profits.

In Sri Lanka, workers at the Brandix Fashion Ware factory had been forced to stay on the job by government authorities and company management, even though many were reporting illness. The plant was only shut as a result of growing opposition from workers, and when tests found that more than 1,000 employees had been infected with COVID-19.

At the same time, Sri Lanka's Central Bank has effectively handed 178 billion rupees (nearly $USD1 billion) to the corporations, while government, with the assistance of the pseudo-left and the unions, is jeopardising the health and lives of workers, in line with the murderous international "herd immunity" program.

Kapila Fernando, the IYSSE convener in Sri Lanka, pointed to the utter inability of the capitalist system to address the social needs of humanity, displayed once again in the criminally-negligent, official response to the pandemic. "That is why the SEP emphasises that combating the virus is not solely a medical issue, but a political fight." he said. The SEP and IYSSE demand the immediate closure of non-essential industries, with full compensation for affected workers, and the provision of adequate funds to carry out the required rates of testing, supply Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and ensure safe quarantining.

The government, Fernando said, had exposed young people and school children to the risk of infection, Successive administrations had spent only a pittance on building health facilities in universities and schools. The authorities were compelled to close schools early last month, as infections sky-rocketed, but are seeking

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to reopen them soon. Their response is the same as that of capitalist governments internationally: "Whatever the danger, children must be sent to school so that their parents can be forced to work."

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah explained that the government's "home quarantine" program was putting the public in grave danger. Speaking about plantation workers in particular, Thevarajah said quarantine regulations could not be followed in their small and under-equipped houses. "In their decisions, governments do not care in the least about the lives of workers and the poor," he declared.

Referring to the role of the trade unions in the plantation sector and elsewhere, Thevarajah said that these organizations had agreed with the decisions taken by employers and the government against the working class. He stressed that the unions were in no way representing the interests of the working class, but the interests of the big companies, intent on compelling workers to remain in their places of employment in order to turn out maximum profits.

Vilani Peiris, a leading member of the SEP, reviewed the support given by every opposition party to the Rajapakse government. They were seeking to suppress growing opposition from workers and the rural poor amid the crisis accelerated by the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Peiris noted that Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), stated that since this was a national catastrophe, he would fully support the government, despite any differences.

The pseudo-left had also lined-up behind the government. Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) leader, Kumar Gunaratnam, had sent letters to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse praising the government's supposed program to fight the pandemic. Peiris said, "These pseudo-lefts function as the defenders of the capitalist system. They reject the revolutionary role of the working class and seek to politically disarm it."

Peiris warned that the Rajapakse government was turning to ever-greater authoritarianism, including through constitutional amendments aimed at developing a presidential dictatorship. This was a response by the ruling elite to mounting social opposition. "The working class," she explained, "cannot spontaneously develop the necessary revolutionary program to fight this reaction. A perspective has to be provided by the revolutionary party. This is the task of the ICFI and its sections."

During the question period, one listener asked in the comment section: "In a world where different people have different abilities, how can one ask for equality, when people are competing according to their abilities?"

In response, Gunadasa said the world's massive social and economic inequality was not a product of differing abilities, but of the outmoded capitalist system. Some 2,000 ultra-wealthy individuals had amassed more wealth than 4.5 billion people combined. That wealth had been accumulated through the extraction of surplus value from wage workers.

Another participant asked for a further explanation of the specific tasks of the working class in combatting the pandemic. In his answer, Gunadasa said that the pandemic was a trigger event that has exposed the criminality of the capitalist system in all countries. It did not secure the interests of the masses, but brought death and poverty. This demonstrated the urgent necessity for working people to take up a struggle for the abolition of the profit system and the establishment of a workers' government.

Gunadasa explained: "The path forward is socialist revolution, aimed at the expropriation of the wealth of the capitalists. Through a socialist revolution, working people have to create a workers' and peasants' government. The SEP proposes to the working class that it build action committees at every workplace and neighbourhood, and go forward with transitional demands aimed at securing the victory of the socialist revolution."

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