

Sri Lankan IYSSE holds well-attended online lecture on 200th anniversary of Friedrich Engels' birth

Our correspondents
24 January 2021

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful lecture earlier this month to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Engels.

Over 50 people, including students, young workers and supporters, participated in the January 10 online event, which was simultaneously translated into Tamil. The lecture was based on a *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) perspective written by International Committee of the Fourth International Secretary Peter Schwarz and published on November 28.

IYSSE convener Kapila Fernando began the meeting by explaining the contemporary relevance of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels whose political work was based on their development of a historical materialist analysis of the contradictions of the capitalist system. The work of these two great revolutionaries, he said, provides us with the necessary perspective to advance the struggles facing workers today.

Sakuntha Hirimuthugoda, a leading member of the IYSSE, delivered the main lecture. He pointed out that although various academics and intellectuals still attempt to question and refute the validity of Marxism, the accuracy of the analysis of Marx and Engels is confirmed by the profound crisis of capitalism today.

The liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991 was declared by the numerous academics to be the demise of socialism and the victory of capitalism. It was “the end of history,” Francis Fukuyama insisted.

“Thirty years after these statements, what has been proven?” Hirimuthugoda asked.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which the WSWS has described as a “trigger event,” the speaker continued, clearly exposes the insoluble contradictions confronting

world capitalism. This includes unprecedented social inequality with massive wealth in the hands of a handful of capitalists and an intolerable situation facing masses of people across the globe.

The response of the ruling elites everywhere, as shown by the fascist conspiracy of Donald Trump, is for police-military forms of rule, Hirimuthugoda said.

The lecturer referred to the *Communist Manifesto* written by Marx and Engels in 1848 which describes “modern bourgeois society, like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.” This, Hirimuthugoda said, accurately describes contemporary capitalism.

Commenting on the irrational reaction of the bourgeoisie to the pandemic, he then quoted from Engels' 1877 classic, *Anti-Duhring*: “The growing perception that existing social institutions are unreasonable and unjust, that reason has become unreason, and right wrong, is only proof that in the modes of production and exchange changes have silently taken place with which the social order, adapted to earlier economic conditions, is no longer in keeping.”

Marx and Engels, however, did not just analyse the reasons for the irrationality of the profit system, Hirimuthugoda continued. They explained that capitalism was establishing the conditions for the building of a new social order and the social force that would overthrow it.

As Marx and Engels analysed, “not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the

proletarians.”

Hirimuthugoda said that Marx and Engels were unique among philosophers in recognising that the working class had to fight on the basis of its own independent political movement to achieve socialism.

Concluding his lecture, Hirimuthugoda noted the resurgence of the class struggle internationally and the growing interest in socialism among youth.

In the current pre-revolutionary period, he said, it is crucially important to study Engels’ work in order to arm oneself with the fundamental conceptions of the socialist perspective.

During the question and answer session, a student from northern Jaffna asked for further clarification on the two fundamental contradictions of the capitalist system.

IYSSE convener Fernando pointed to the conflict between global production and the capitalist nation state system and referred to the rising global and regional geopolitical tensions. The US-led military campaign against China in the Indian Ocean region, he said, was an expression of these tensions, reflected in Washington’s continuous pressure on the Rajapakse regime to distance itself from China.

Fernando explained that the private ownership of the means of production and the capitalist nation state system were blocking major advances in medical science needed to rapidly respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

Another participant asked for details on the difference between scientific socialism and utopian socialism. Hirimuthugoda explained that utopian socialists believed that socialism could be developed outside the class struggle and via a series of reforms.

“The utopian socialists,” he said, “did not accept the revolutionary role of the working class.” While utopian socialists criticised the capitalist system, they failed to scientifically explain how and why it declined and therefore could not present a correct perspective on the realisation of socialism.

Quoting from Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, he said: “Socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes—the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.”

Another participant asked the relation between

Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution and the fight against the politics of the petty bourgeoisie. He referred to the address of the Central Committee to the Communist League, by Marx and Engels in 1850, which insisted on the complete political independence of the working class from the petty bourgeois democrats.

Prageeth Aravinda, another IYSSE member, explained the counter-revolutionary role of the petty bourgeoisie during revolutionary uprisings of the working class in 1848. The political lessons of this strategic experience and other historical developments, he said, provided the foundations for Trotsky’s elaboration of the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

Trotsky’s analysis demonstrated that the tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution in countries with belated capitalist development could only be achieved by the working class leading the rural masses in overthrowing the profit system through a socialist revolution as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

After further questions and discussion, the online event concluded with an appeal by IYSSE convener Fernando for all those in attendance to actively participate in the struggle for socialism by joining the SEP and the IYSSE.



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