

Sri Lanka: SEP meeting discusses socialist program to fight the pandemic

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a lively online meeting last Thursday to discuss the socialist and internationalist policies required to combat COVID-19.

The meeting, which was held on August 26, attracted almost 200 people with about 150 joining the event, along with dozens more watching on the party's Facebook page. Listeners attended from across Sri Lanka as well as India, France, the Middle East and several other places around the world. The video has so far been viewed by more than 1,200 people.

SEP political committee member Prageeth Aravinda chaired the meeting, pointing out that the catastrophic situation facing millions of people around the world was a result of the ruling classes placing profits above human lives.

The International Committee of the Fourth International's description of the pandemic as a "trigger event" arising from the contradictions of the capitalist system had been confirmed, he said, noting the new wave of working-class struggles emerging around the world. Workers, however, he said, had to break from their treacherous leaderships, and all bourgeois ideologies, in order to fight the pandemic on the basis of a socialist perspective.

Dr. Kamal Mahagama who spoke on behalf of the Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC), provided the meeting with a scientific analysis of the surging pandemic and the criminal response of the governments everywhere. His report was enriched with information and remarks made during the August 22 international online discussion, "For a Global Strategy to Stop the Pandemic and Save Lives!" hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Using data charts from Johns Hopkins University, Mahagama pointed out that Sri Lanka's current death rate for the coronavirus rate is ten times worse than India. He explained that the so-called herd immunity and mitigation methods adopted by governments around the world were based on the profit motive and that these strategies were

shown to be deadly.

The WSWS's conclusion that the eradication of the pandemic was the only viable perspective was "absolutely correct," he said. "We, as health workers, can never agree with the inhumane and deadly policy of 'living with the pandemic.'"

Using graphs to compare the possible outcome of the various methods of pandemic control, he concluded "that if we made a scientific effort to control the pandemic completely, it could be completely eradicated within two weeks." This required proper public health measures with a complete lockdown and vaccination of the entire population.

SEP Political Committee member and IYSSE convenor Kapila Fernando explained that the re-opening of schools in many countries had led to increasing death rates among children worldwide. He said that the government had refused to expand facilities for online education to cover all students in the country.

"The Rajapakse government is shifting the burden of the pandemic entirely onto the working class, whilst providing every opportunity for the big capitalists to maximise their profits," he said.

Reviewing the ongoing struggle by Sri Lankan teachers, he called on teachers to break from the unions, which were preparing for another betrayal, and join the Educators Action Committee established by the SEP.

SEP Assistant National Secretary Deepal Jayasekera gave the main report, emphasising that COVID-19 could not be eradicated in a single country and that a global effort was required. "The international working class must therefore take up the task of mobilising and coordinating global resources to fight the pandemic," he said.

Like his counterparts around the world, President Rajapakse has said that the people must "understand the reality" and "live with the virus," the speaker said. This meant workers had to keep working in unsafe conditions, at the expense of their own lives and the lives of their children and loved ones, to generate profits for the capitalists.

Jayasekera explained how the capitalist rulers

everywhere—from Biden in the US, Boris Johnson in the UK and Modi in India—were moving to lift the limited existing restrictions to fully reopen the capitalist economy.

“In Sri Lanka the garment industry is defined as an ‘essential service’ because it generates huge profits for the capitalists, and so it is operating without any hindrance,” he said. “It is the working class, not the bourgeoisie that must decide the essential services that must be operated during the pandemic,” he added.

The speaker said the Rajapakse regime was preparing dictatorial forms of rule to deal with workers now entering the struggle. Reviewing the role of unions, and their unwavering support for the government, he said workers had to take control of their struggles by building action committees in every workplace.

Sri Lankan workers could only fight the worsening pandemic and the repressive methods of the Rajapakse government by fighting for socialist policies in solidarity with the working class in the region and globally. Jayasekera concluded by urging participants to study the International Committee of the Fourth International’s analysis and program and joining the SEP to take forward the fight for socialism.

Dr. Mahagama was asked several questions during the meeting’s discussion period. He explained that it was essential to shut down all non-essential industries and impose a full lockdown in order to eradicate COVID-19 pandemic. “There should be no limit on the resources used to improve the overall health facilities but this is not possible without the working class seizing those resources from the capitalists,” he said.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias participated in the discussion, noting the overwhelming audience response to Dr. Mahagama’s report and placing it in a broader context.

“This showed how the working people, are keenly interested in a real scientific exposition of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Global capitalism operates in complete defiance of scientific explanations in order to defend its profit interests. Capitalism in crisis has become hostile to science,” he said.

Dias said that capitalism, which previously developed science in opposition to feudal mysticism and for the progress of humanity, was now in its highest final stage in the form of imperialism and that its promotion of genuine science had turned into its opposite.

In the present period in history, he continued, the sciences can flourish only when combined with the historic interests of the working class which are opposed to the barbaric profit demands of the bourgeoisie. This has been amply revealed during the pandemic crisis.

Dias quoted the last passage of Friedrich Engels’s

pamphlet *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* to explain the point. As Engels said: “The more ruthlessly and disinterestedly science proceeds the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests and aspirations of the workers. The new tendency [Marxism], which recognised that the key to the understanding of the whole history of society lies in the history of the development of labour, from the outset addressed itself by preference to the working class and here found the response which it neither sought nor expected from officially recognised science.” Dias continued: “The public response to our meeting here, as well as the global response for WSWS online meeting on August 22, vindicates the perspective outlined by Engels...”

“The mantra equally repeated by Rajapakse government and all sections of the bourgeoisie and all its lackeys in the left, to justify murderous policies of the capitalist rule, is that Sri Lanka is a poor country and so it cannot afford to lockdown economic activities.

“All of them cover up the fact that the rich capitalist countries are no less reluctant to close down production despite deaths running into multi-millions and that it is the capitalist-imperialist system that they represent and cling onto which is responsible for the poverty that exists in the former colonial world.

“While arguing for the above position, the pseudo-lefts support all the anti-working-people attacks waged by the Rajapakse government, including cuts in social welfare benefits to the rural poor. But they keep mum on the spending of over \$4 billion a year in debt servicing to foreign banks. They are completely silent about the multi-million tax concessions and cash subsidies paid to the large employers. In opposition to all the pro-capitalist parties, the SEP raises the demands to abrogate all re-payment of foreign loans and to establish a sliding scale of tax increases for the rich,” Dias said.

The speaker stressed that eradication of COVID-19 depended on the working class winning political power. He concluded by pointing out that the SEP would take the initiative in politically educating workers in all key sectors of the economy and amongst the youth, such as universities. What is required, he said, is to build the SEP as a mass revolutionary party to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government in Sri Lanka, as part of a federation of Socialist States of South Asia and internationally.



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