Enthusiastic support for SEP's forthcoming public meeting on Sri Lankan government's austerity budget

Our reporters
23 November 2021

The Sri Lankan government's 2022 budget is a brutal attempt to impose the burden of the economic crisis on workers and the rural poor. It involves slashing the budget deficit to 8.8 percent of GDP, down from 14.7 percent last year, with 173 billion rupees ($US855 million) cut from social spending, including to the health, poverty alleviation, child welfare and rural development sectors.

Indirect taxes will be increased and the public sector downsized through the "commercialisation" of about 300 state-owned enterprises and further privatisation measures.

After presenting his budget to the parliament, Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse, brother of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, arrogantly declared that public servants' salaries were a "heavy burden" on the government.

Tens of thousands of workers and rural toilers have been involved in strikes, protests and other action over wages, social conditions and jobs in the months leading up to this month's budget announcement. The Sri Lankan unions, which have no fundamental differences with the government's policies, have diverted these struggles with the false claim that Colombo can be pressured to change course, then shut down and betrayed all industrial action.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are holding an online public meeting on Sunday, November 28 at 4 p.m. to discuss these betrayals and the socialist program the working class needs to fight the government's class-war budget.

As part of the campaign for the meeting SEP and IYSSE members have been widely circulating copies of the "Sri Lankan finance minister's budget proposals deepen social attacks" published by the WSWS and discussing with workers the political lessons of recent struggles, the conditions they face, and the necessity for a socialist perspective.

A **Kandy General Hospital worker** said the 2022 budget failed to address the difficult situation facing health workers or their wage demands.

"Currently the PPE [personal protective equipment] provided to us is very limited. As a result, many minor staff workers have been infected with the [COVID-19] virus. As far as I know, there's not even a face mask in the new PPE kit. The budget cuts in healthcare expenditure will exacerbate the situation and see more loss of life from the pandemic."

Recent protests organised by the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and trade unions affiliated to those parties simply exploited workers' anger over worsening social conditions, he said.

"The people leading these struggles are those who previously ruled the country. People have not forgotten that they acted in same way as the current government. These unions gave workers false hopes that they would receive relief from the budget."

The Kandy General Hospital worker endorsed the rank-and-file committees established by SEP in education, health, apparel and plantation industries and the development of an International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. "Workers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and to fight for a socialist perspective to end the devastation of the pandemic and to solve the problems of the people," he said.

Ekanayake, a Kandy school teacher, commented on the budget's proposed salary increase for teachers: "These promises cannot be trusted until we see them in our payrolls. At the same time, the meagre salary increase is not a victory when compared with the rising cost of

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essential food items such as rice, flour, sugar and gas, which have increased several times," he said.

A Colombo port worker spoke about the accelerating government moves to privatise state-owned enterprises. "Thirteen acres of lands belonging to the port is to be handed over to a Chinese company. Last year, 10,000 workers went on strike against the handing over of the port's Eastern Terminal to an Indian company, but all those struggles were betrayed by union leaders."

Privatisation at the port resulted in the use of manpower [contract] workers at low wages. "Permanent jobs at the port have been reduced while many young people are being exploited as manpower employees under very poor working conditions. How do they survive in a situation where prices for essentials are soaring?" he asked.

P. Prabhakaran, from the Abbotsleigh Estate, just outside Hatton in Sri Lanka's Nuwara-Eliya district, told the WSWS that he had never experienced such a large increase in the cost of living.

"The price of everything has doubled or tripled. For example, we usually buy 250 grams of vegetables for 30 rupees. Now it is more than 80 rupees," he said.

Prabhakaran, who works in the estate's tea factory and is paid just 25,000 rupees a month, explained that the monthly cost of family meals without vegetables was about 21,000 rupees. "I also have to pay for the education of my two school-going children, he said.

"The pandemic has also troubled us again. For the past two years my wife has been working in the estate but she broke a bone in her leg while working. The doctor recommended minor surgery but the factory did not help us and so the surgery wasn't done because of our financial problems," he added.

Garment workers and others employed in Sri Lanka's export processing zones are also being hard hit by the rising cost of living.

A female worker from the Koggala Free Trade Zone in the Southern Province described the difficult conditions she confronts. "I work in a plastics factory and am paid a salary of 500 rupees for an eight-hour working day and 50 rupees per overtime hour. My husband is a cancer patient and I have children who are still studying.

"I work in this job because I have to. I can't afford the current cost of living. We eat only one curry per meal and take our food to work like this and share it with our friends. Capitalist governments do not solve the problems we face. What we need is a working-class government to come to power and overcome the problems of the working class," she said.

A retired public servant from Ambalangoda in the Southern Province, denounced the finance minister's claim that the public service was a "heavy burden" and spoke out against the budget's lifting of the retirement age to 65.

"It's a question of whether someone who has served 65 years will live longer," he said. "This is trying to push people to death while in service so they don't have to pay a pension. The government is trying to get out of the economic crisis by harassing the poor in this way," he said.

P. P. Aberathna, a farmer from Hebarawa in Uva Province, explained the harsh living conditions he and his family faced and the impact of the government's austerity budget.

"We are working to cultivate at least a part of our paddy fields in order to prevent us dying from starvation. We have not been provided fertilizer nor the promised 7,500-rupee relief payment.

"Don't talk to me about the budget. Even the cost of salt is increasing on an almost daily basis while sugar, flour, cooking gas, rice and all others have gone up to levels we can't afford. Poor farmers have always been cheated always.

"[Politicians] keep coming to visit us during election time, promising this and that, but, after collecting our votes with these sorts of lies, none of them visit our villages. We are waiting to welcome them now.

"We poor farmers have to cultivate for them to eat and enjoy their lives but we are not given any relief. The [JVP-affiliated] All Ceylon Peasant Federation are threatening to encircle the parliament but these are just empty phrases. They have no idea about our real problems and only putting on a media show to get votes.

"I think you [the SEP] have a real program against these liars and we would like to work on such a program," he said.

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