

# SEP meeting discusses the socialist policies needed to fight Sri Lankan government's budget

Our correspondents  
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Last Sunday, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful online public meeting attended by almost 100 people, including students and workers from across Sri Lanka, as well as India and the Middle East. Entitled, “How to fight the Rajapakse government’s austerity budget?” the video has so far been viewed by over 1,000 people and shared more than 300 times.

Chairing the meeting, SEP Assistant National Secretary Deepal Jayasekara pointed out that the main challenge for workers fighting the government’s brutal social measures was to arm themselves with a socialist political perspective.

SEP Political Committee member Saman Gunadasa delivered the main report. He said that while the principal concern of all Sri Lankan capitalist parties was how to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the masses, the SEP meeting was called to discuss how working people could fight for their own interests.

The speaker referred to Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse’s budget speech declaration that the government faced “history’s most challenging period” but was “equipped with all the necessary strengths to manage the economy and overcome such challenges.”

This statement, Gunadasa said, meant that Colombo was unleashing a ruthless attack on the jobs and living conditions of working class and the oppressed in order to secure the profit interests of big business. This involved tax holidays for capitalists but a wage freeze for workers, along with cuts in allocations for public healthcare, samurdhi (limited welfare allowances for the poor), water supply, women and child development, and rural housing.

Similar class war attacks, he said, were being imposed by ruling elites all over the world in response to the worsening economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gunadasa noted that Sri Lanka’s debt-ridden economy now ranked alongside Ethiopia, Iraq and Tunisia.

“The budget proposes to impose this crisis on working people. It will certainly involve a massive attack on the working class for the government to reduce the budget deficit, which exceeded 14.7 percent of GDP in 2020, to 8.8 percent of GDP in the next year,” he said.

The government’s main target was the public sector, Gunadasa continued, citing the finance minister’s declaration that the sector was an “unbearable burden.” Colombo’s response was for large state sector budget cuts and a sweeping privatisation program.

To boost dollar reserves, export-manufacturing plants continued to operate, even though thousands of factory workers were being infected with COVID-19. Sri Lankans working abroad also had been neglected by Colombo in order to maintain the inflow of remittances, the speaker said.

Gunadasa posed a question: “What has happened to the bourgeoisie, including the corporations and big business [during the pandemic], while the working class faced such vicious attacks?”

He answered by detailing how President Rajapakse had directed the Central Bank to provide massive concessionary funds to big businesses, as well as more tax cuts and other concessions. “The capitalist companies were granted the social wealth extracted from the workers,” he said.

Gunadasa said the international working class was

not willing to accept these austerity attacks. He referenced the eruption of strikes and protests in Sri Lanka and around the world. Rajapakse, in line with his global counterparts, was responding to the rising social opposition by turning to dictatorial forms of rule.

Gunadasa analysed the role of Sri Lanka's opposition parties. "At first glance, these parties seem to be criticising the government, but if you look closely at what is being said, they are advising the government on better ways to carry out the government's program."

The main opposition parties, the Samagi Jana Balawewayaya and the United National Party, were calling on the government to seek more loans from the International Monetary Fund.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna covered up the fact that the root of the problem is the capitalist system by falsely claiming the crisis was a result of government corruption and fraud.

The pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party was setting a political trap for the working class by calling for a "broad left front," which included the bourgeois parties.

"All these groups are based on a reactionary nationalist program," the speaker said. Workers could only defend their rights and win their demands by fighting for the unification of the international working class.

To initiate such a struggle, Gunadasa said, workers in every workplace, regardless of their employment categories or other artificial divisions, had to organise rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union bureaucracies and fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies.

"Such a government will put an end to capitalist exploitation. Working people should use the achievements of their labour directly for social necessity, not private profit," he stressed. "The resources of society should belong to the working people."

Concluding his speech, Gunadasa invited audience members to join the struggle led by the International Committee of the Fourth international (ICFI) and support the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The meeting concluded with a question-and-answer session. Answering a question about the unification of

farmers' struggles in India and Sri Lanka, Gunadasa explained the need for a unified independent movement of Indian and Sri Lankan workers based on socialist and internationalist policies to rally poor farmers in both countries.

Nationalist trade unions in India and Sri Lanka, including those led by Indian Stalinist parties, he said, were hostile to the development of such a unified movement. The Trotskyist SEP was the only party in the South Asian region fighting for this perspective.

Jayasekera, the meeting chair, responded to a question from a listener in South India about the role of caste-based parties. The main role of these parties, Jayasekera explained, was to divide workers while securing the privileges for a tiny elite in the relevant castes, at the expense of the vast majority of workers and oppressed masses.

The pro-imperialist bourgeoisie in the backward capitalist countries, including India, he continued, "are incapable in overcoming the unresolved problems of democratic revolution, such as the agrarian questions and caste oppression." These problems could be solved only by the working class, rallying all other oppressed masses and fighting for socialist policies.



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