

# Massive social protests erupt in Sri Lanka: A critical development in the global class struggle

Statement of the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board  
4 April 2022

The events in Sri Lanka demand the closest attention of workers throughout the world. The mass protests will have a consequential impact on the future development of the international class struggle.

Immense social anger over the soaring price of food and petrol, hours-long electricity power cuts, an acute shortage of medical supplies and, more generally, the ever more intolerable conditions of life for working people has erupted in mass protests across the island country. Calls for the immediate resignation of the right-wing, Sinhala-chauvinist regime of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse are galvanizing mass support in both the majority Sinhalese south and the largely Tamil northeast.

In response, the government declared a state of emergency last Friday. The military have been armed with police powers and people can be detained without charge for prolonged periods.

These measures and the deployment of large numbers of security forces on the streets of the capital, Colombo, failed to prevent tens of thousands from joining protests Saturday in Colombo's suburbs and at university campuses. A shaken government then imposed a 36-hour nationwide curfew till Monday morning. According to police, 664 people were arrested for demonstrating Saturday evening in defiance of the curfew in the Western Province, where Colombo is located.

Starting early Sunday the authorities blocked communication on major social media platforms and messaging apps, which are increasingly being used to organize anti-government protests independent of the opposition parties. But in the face of a public outcry, the Defence Ministry reportedly dropped its blanket censorship by nightfall.

In defiance of the curfew, protests in the hundreds and thousands took place on Sunday in Colombo and in towns and cities across the country demanding that the government go. Amid growing turmoil in the government's ranks, the cabinet resigned en masse on Sunday evening.

Sri Lanka has been roiled economically and socially by the more than two-year COVID-19 pandemic. International tourism and foreign remittances, both major sources of much-needed foreign currency, collapsed. Over the past year, large sections of the working class, including teachers, health care, tea plantation and port workers, have waged strikes and protests to oppose declining real wages, the lack of COVID-19 protections and privatization.

These militant struggles were isolated and sold out by the trade unions.

Now the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine has triggered major spikes in food and fuel prices. Officially, inflation is at 17 percent. This is in a country where even before the ravages of the pandemic the annual per capita household income was US\$1,420, the top one percent had a more than 20 percent share of both wealth and income, and the bottom 50 percent struggled to survive on just 14 percent of national income and a 4.3 percent wealth share.

Under pressure from global capital to make interest payments of \$4 billion this year, even though total foreign currency reserves are little more than half that, the Rajapakse government and Sri Lankan ruling class are redoubling their efforts to place the full burden of the crisis on the working class and rural toilers. The price rises and power blackouts are only a beginning.

The government is seeking an IMF "bailout" which will be predicated on massive cuts to social spending and a fire sale of state-owned companies and infrastructure. The Biden administration will use American imperialism's domination of the IMF to ratchet up pressure on Colombo to integrate the country still more fully into its ever-escalating drive to strategically encircle and threaten China.

The Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is fighting to rally the working class against the government and all the parties of the ruling class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.

The capitalist establishment declaim in unison that Sri Lanka is bankrupt and there are no resources to protect the population from global "market forces" and provide essential public services. The Socialist Equality Party rejects these arguments, which are aimed at sowing a sense of demoralization and hopelessness. It insists that the working class must take over the financial, industrial and natural resources of the country. If Sri Lanka's resources are to be mobilized in the interests of society, the wealth of the capitalist ruling class must be impounded through the revolutionary political mobilization of the working class and the rural masses. The bourgeoisie must be removed from political power, through the establishment of a workers' government in alliance with the rural poor.

However, while advancing the necessary demands for the development of the class struggle against the Sri Lankan ruling class, the Socialist Equality Party insists that the crisis unfolding within the country must be seen within its international context. Therefore, the intervention of the party is based on an international strategy.

That is why the SEP fights to turn workers in Sri Lanka toward the growing global working-class upsurge. It makes special appeal to the workers of India across the Palk Strait, tens of millions of whom joined a two-day general strike last week to oppose the pro-investor policies of the Narendra Modi-led BJP government.

Last week, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar traveled to Colombo to offer political and economic support to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. New Delhi is using the crisis to press its and Washington's demands the island serve as a staging ground for operations against China in the Indian Ocean. But the greatest fear of the Indian ruling class is that a social explosion in Sri Lanka will stimulate class struggle in Tamil Nadu and across India. In 1987, Indian troops intervened in the island when the Indian ruling class became apprehensive that the Sri Lankan civil war was dangerously destabilizing the reactionary state system created through the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent.

The social-political crisis in Sri Lanka is an advanced expression of the crisis engulfing world capitalism. The pandemic and the outbreak of war in Europe have economically and politically destabilized class relations that were already fraught from decades of ever-deepening social inequality, recurring economic crises and imperialist aggression and war.

With billions of people in Africa, the Middle East and Asia facing destitution, hunger and even famine due to spiraling prices and food shortages, the UN and other establishment institutions are issuing nervous warnings of mass social unrest. Mass strikes and protests have already erupted across the Middle East from Iraq and Sudan to Tunisia.

The class struggle is also rapidly intensifying in the imperialist centres, fueled by the ruling class' ruinous response to the pandemic and the fallout from the economic war they have launched against Russia, alongside their proxy military conflict in Ukraine. In Spain truckers have mounted a weeks-long strike against fuel price rises in defiance of a massive police crackdown ordered by the PSOE-Podemos government. In the US, the strike wave that began last year continues to swell. This class movement has been characterized by a growing worker rebellion against the corporatist trade unions that for decades have suppressed the class struggle.

The fundamental challenge is to transform the growing resistance of the global working class into a conscious and unified struggle for international socialism.

In answer to the crisis now convulsing the island, the Socialist Equality Party is advancing a program of transitional demands to systematically mobilize the working class as an independent political power, rallying the toilers behind it against the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, its parties and state.

The distribution of critical goods, including food, medicines and fuel must be placed under the supervision and control of the working class, the wealth of the super-rich and the profits and

financial assets of the banks and major domestic and transnational corporations seized and redirected to meeting social needs. Health care and education must not be bled white to satiate the vampires of Wall Street, London and Tokyo.

The SEP fights for the building of rank-and-file and action committees in workplaces and neighborhoods, independent of the trade unions and all the political representatives of the bourgeoisie and its petty-bourgeois supporters, to fight for these and all measures necessary to meet the basic social needs of working people. As these committees grow and prove themselves in struggle, rallying ever wider sections of the urban and rural masses behind them, they will become organs of independent working-class political power, in opposition to the parliament and the repressive institutions of the capitalist elite.

The SEP has continually alerted the masses to the threat that an increasingly desperate and crisis-ridden ruling class will attempt to establish a police-military dictatorship. Rajapakse, a war criminal responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the Sri Lankan ruling elite's three-decade communal war against the Tamil minority, has stacked his government with military officers, while stoking Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism.

In opposing the social devastation now being imposed on Sri Lanka, the working class is challenging not just the Rajapakse clique and their Sri Lanka People's Front government or the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, but global capital and imperialism. None of the burning problems, from the pandemic and rampant social inequality, to imperialist oppression and the war, can be solved outside of the global overthrow of capitalism and the outmoded system of rival nation-states in which it is historically rooted.

Frightened Sri Lankan government officials have compared the events now unfolding on the island to the 2011 Arab Spring, the mass popular upsurge that felled the US-backed Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt.

The central lesson of the Arab Spring is the pivotal role of revolutionary leadership. The transformation of the growing working-class resistance into a mass movement for socialism in Sri Lanka and India and around the world is dependent on the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution.



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