

Protesters outside Sri Lankan High Commission in London speak on social and political crisis

Our reporters
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A crowd of 300 people demonstrated yesterday outside the Sri Lanka High Commission in London in support of the mass protests that have rocked the country in recent weeks.

Skyrocketing prices, putting necessities beyond the reach of millions of Sri Lankans, have compounded years of economic crisis and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, driving millions onto the streets to demand the ouster of President Gotabaya (“Gota”) Rajapakse.

Solidarity demonstrations have been held by the Sri Lankan diaspora across the world.

Many protestors carried home-made placards with slogans including “Give back the wealth you looted”, “Return stolen money”, “Sri Lanka we stand with you”, “We are with you Sri Lanka”, “We stand in solidarity with the Sri Lankan people”, “Feed people, fuel the country, fire Gota”, and “You messed with the wrong generation”.

There were shouts of “Gota go home” and the crowd chanted “People are dying on their feet; because they have nothing to eat”, “Gota, Gota the time has come; to face justice for the things you’ve done”, and “Gota, Gota it’s not just you; it’s your family and your class too”.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) has issued a statement calling for the bringing down of the Rajapakse government, the abolition of the executive presidency, an end to austerity and starvation, and for action committees of workers to fight for a socialist programme to secure food, fuel and medicines for all. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters distributed the statement at the London demonstration and spoke with protesters.

Pri held a placard reading, “They have robbed the government money—give it back and go home!” She said, “In Sri Lanka now we’re in a crisis. We don’t have fuel, we don’t have petrol, we don’t have basic food necessities for people. One family basically governs in Sri Lanka, now people are expecting them to leave the government now.”

“My friends and family are in Sri Lanka. We are here today for them. We are comfortable living here, but we know what’s going on in Sri Lanka.

“The schools are basically closed now. They’re supposed to be closed middle of April, but now they’re closed because the students can’t go back to school, they can’t run the school vans, no buses, transport is basically broken down.

“Workers have to demonstrate and ask the government to step down, and whoever wants to govern in the right way, not the corrupted way, they should step in. Everyone else is getting together. There are Sri Lankan Tamils, Muslims, Hindu, no religious differences, everyone is on the road asking them to step in and run the government properly.

“The Sri Lankans are reunited as one, we are not divided any more. They are united in this crisis. I am sure the people are determined to keep protesting. One family brought Sri Lanka to this, just one family. Their rule is five or six ministers in the top chairs, they’re the ones who are doing this.”

Senula, a student, said, “Our parents shipped us here because of the people in charge of Sri Lanka. We are from middle class families. My father is an engineer but still it is difficult for them to live. Just imagine how working class people are doing. How can they live, how can they get basic necessities?

“I am 18, from Colombo and these protests were initiated by young people because they could see what was happening to the country. They couldn’t bear this anymore. They’ve messed with the wrong generation. The situation in Sri Lanka is messed up and the young generation, the university students are leading the riots and the protests. We have the energy. We have the courage.

“We need to save our country. We are demanding the president to step down and his whole family leave. All the workers should be given an opportunity to speak this time, not the politicians. They cannot stop us this time, they imposed a curfew and still the protesting continued. The overall goal is to get rid of the president and his family and pay us back the money they have stolen. These people are billionaires.”

Buddhi, a young woman who runs a medical centre with her partner said, “We share the same pain that everyone in Sri Lanka is bearing at the moment, which is very difficult with the super-high cost of living. There’s no means to meet basic needs, essentials, and a very corrupt government.

“Some people voted for them a couple of years ago hoping that they will make happen all the promises they gave, all the pictures they painted, that the country would be made a better place, but none of it happened.

“For the last 74 years since we became an independent country, different teams have come, giving all sorts of false promises. Some things did happen but there’s a lot more that the country is still

needing, the common man is still needing.

“We hope, at least now that we’ve come together. You know, we were grateful for these corrupt politicians for doing what they did, because the people have come together now, and they’re fighting the good fight together as one team, and we really hope we can win this. If not, a couple of years down the line we won’t even have a country to call Sri Lanka. I think every citizen of every country has the same dream... we want to try and save the country from all these corrupt and horrible politicians.

“My parents get stuck in queues for gasoline, for basic needs. My dad has been in a gasoline queue for at least five or six hours before coming here.

“We have a medical establishment, so we try to provide certain services for patients. In general, if things were normal, it wouldn’t be so difficult to make ends meet. We’ve had an ok education, we’re able to do a decent job, make enough to survive and to help others, do good with our lives. But even that class, the middle class, is suffering now. It’s like one or two percent of the Sri Lankan population is enjoying all this wealth, for what? It’s injustice on a grand scale.

“Every time the cost of living goes higher, we cannot increase the medical price for the common man. How are they going to pay? How are they going to pay for essential medical needs?

“We want to preserve what we should as a country for future generations to come. So that we can live a more dignified life than this. That’s why I think everyone is here. My parents are going back in a couple of days, so they will join the fight there as well. From wherever we are, we need to make sure our voice is heard. We as the common people, we are the majority.”

On the social position of the working class, she said, “They’re all struggling. It’s worse for people who do day jobs, because how are they going to be in a protest, how are they going to be in a queue and make an ok living for the day? How are they going to feed their kids, how are they going to take care of the family, how are the kids going to learn?

“Average wages are 300-500 rupees, which is a very few pounds. A day! Imagine losing that, imagine not having savings, imagine living on rent, imagine having to pay all these skyrocketing bills. Middle class people are struggling, they bring their lunch from home, they’re struggling to open it in front of other colleagues and share it because all they’ve got is one little bit of rice with one tiny curry.

“Prices rise every year, everywhere in the world... it can be a pandemic, it can be a war... but how are we going to face it? How are we going to fight it, or how are we going to make it sustainable so that people don’t collapse, people don’t die of hunger? We’re talking about the twenty-first century!

“I know that there are countries in the world that are still struggling for basic needs, but as a world we need to make humanity win. We need to fight. We have enough and more resources in the world to feed everybody.”

Bandula held a homemade placard reading “Gota go home or go to jail”. He said, “The price of everything for common people has shot up. The situation is so bad that you go and get a loaf of bread in the morning and then go to get a loaf in the afternoon, but the price has shot up! It’s the same with rice, with fuel. We can’t

afford it. The rupee is worthless. Because of inflation they are printing rupees like they are printing newspapers.”

Keshini studies in Cardiff, Wales. She said, “Sri Lanka is going through so much right now in terms of fuel shortages, lack of medicines and so on. There has been a complete mismanagement in government policy and as a result the citizens are the ones who are suffering. At the same time, there is a lot of corruption going on to a point where it has become a joke.

“Back home, people go through so much to protest, so this is the least we can do here, to show solidarity. I am a student in Cardiff, so I have come all the way from Wales today. My family is lucky as we are middle to upper middle class, but now we are all suffering.

“The last two years we have suffered with COVID. The country is now going through a period where there is no electricity due to the power cuts. Because of import restrictions, necessities are not available. Now the government are taking loans to buy fuel. They have taken one Chinese loan to pay off another Chinese loan!

“Rajapakse should have resigned. If you cannot govern the country, you should leave. But they have so much more to lose because the moment you resign you lose that immunity that you have. Which is why they are holding onto power when nobody wants them.

“Governments no longer understand the general population and their needs. This has been going on for quite a while, but I think COVID has fast forwarded the issue. If we continue in this way, then the people are going to starve. I am so concerned for my family, especially if they get sick, as there are no basic medicines anymore.

“The difference between here in the UK and Sri Lanka now is that here the hospitals have not fallen to a point where you do not have basic medicine. You are not at a point where electricity in the homes is limited to 13 hours. Prior to the protests in Sri Lanka, the government had the audacity to propose a power cut of 16 hours a day. They were getting to a point where people couldn’t bear it. We had ministers living in luxury and the general public were suffering. I feel like this was the breaking point to which people came out onto the streets to say no, we are not putting up with this anymore.”



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