

Sri Lankan SEP holds press conference to outline way forward for mass protests

Our correspondents
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Wije Dias, the general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, addressed a media conference on Friday to outline the SEP's socialist program of action for the mass protests by working people and youth against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government.

For almost a week, hundreds of thousands of workers, students, professionals, unemployed people, housewives and rural toilers across the island have been holding protests demanding the resignation of Rajapakse and his government.

The press conference, held in the Colombo National Library Conference Hall, was broadcast live through Facebook and over 160 people watched it live. Journalists from the Tamil daily paper *Virakesari* and the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the event.

The SEP issued a statement the previous day titled, "Bring down Sri Lanka's Rajapakse government! Abolish the executive presidency! No to austerity and starvation! Form action committees to fight for a socialist program of action to secure food, fuel and medicines for all!"

Dias began his comments by characterising the situation as a mass insurrectionary one. "We have seen in the last several days hundreds of thousands of people from all over the country—workers, youngsters, oppressed, peasants, even housewives with their infants, participating in the agitations."

Dias drew an historical parallel with the hartal (general strike and closure of businesses) in August 1953: "If we recall the 1953 hartal, there was such a mass uprising throughout the country. But the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the leader of the working class at the time, decided to stop it within a day.

"Even though workers and youth tried to carry on with the struggle for three days on their own, the

capitalist government at the time shot and killed nine demonstrators and managed to end the struggle. Since then, this is the most intense struggle that has erupted in this country.

"Even though today's struggle shows the determination of workers, surrounded by youth, peasants and various oppressed sections of the society, there is a big gap in considering the perspective or program of the struggle. This big gap is being created collectively by all the so-called left organisations, trade unions and pseudo-lefts."

Dias explained: "Now the question of perspective of these day-and-night struggles has come to the foreground. Even though the masses are rallied around the slogan, 'The president must quit,' they need a perspective.

"The Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, are the only organisations grappling with the issue of the perspective for the struggles of the working class, oppressed and youth."

Dias noted that "people have come to the streets due to scarcities and lengthy queues to buy fuel, cooking gas and milk powder, and the skyrocketing of prices of essentials." Meeting these needs posed the necessity for the taking of state power by the working class to establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement a socialist program.

Dias said these issues were not being widely discussed. This lack of political perspective was being exploited by the government, the opposition parties and pseudo-lefts to trap the masses within the framework of forming an alternative bourgeois government.

Dias continued: "The SEP seriously warns people not to be misled by this trap. The formation of an interim or all-party government is being proposed with the

existence of the presidential executive powers that imposed emergency decrees and curfews on mass agitations, and deployed the police and armed forces to curb the mass protests.”

By contrast, the SEP was proposing the abolition of the executive presidency and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government. “This kind of government will not be established through the parliament. For that, the working class must prepare its own organisations with the support of the oppressed.

“For that, the SEP proposes action committees. At each and every workplace and plantation these workers’ action committees must be established, independent from the bourgeois parties and their agencies.”

Dias proposed transitional demands to animate the work of the action committees, addressing the pressing needs of the working people and rural toilers.

“The government is now trying to pay one billion dollars to international finance capital. This must be immediately stopped.” The working class has to take matters into its own hands and act to stop all debt payments.

“Under so-called independence for 74 years, governments of all colours have created this debt, not for the welfare of the people but to build armed forces and implement the requirements of investors to protect capitalism.

“Now repayment of these debts has been pushed onto the shoulders of the people. Hence it’s totally justifiable to fight against paying back the debt... These monies must be utilised to solve the burning issues of workers, the oppressed and youth.”

Dias warned that IMF-dictated austerity measures, which the government was seeking to implement with the support of all the official opposition parties, would lead to cuts in jobs, further increases in the cost of living, privatisation and the abolition of welfare measures. The action committees would fight those austerity programs.

“All the big industries, plantations and banks must be nationalised under workers’ control.” That would establish democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential resources critical for the lives of people.

Dias said the allies of the Sri Lankan workers in their fight against the ruling class onslaught on their basic

social and democratic rights were their class brothers and sisters internationally, including in the US, Europe, African, Latin America and Asia, who had entered into struggles against similar attacks.

He said the International Committee of Fourth International (ICFI) “is fighting through the WSWS to make the working class around the world aware of the struggle of the Sri Lankan workers and to mobilise the support of those workers.”

Dias said the imperialist intervention in Ukraine could instigate a third world war. He also explained how this US-NATO war drive against Russia had further escalated the economic crisis confronting the Sri Lankan ruling class. He said Sri Lankan workers needed to be part of a global anti-war movement based on the fight for socialism.

Describing the working class struggles in India and across South Asia, Dias explained the SEP’s work to unite and mobilise workers throughout the region, including Sri Lanka’s civil war-torn north and east, based on a socialist program.

A journalist from *Virakesari* asked why the SEP had emphasised the participation of Tamil and Muslim protesters in the island’s North and East.

Dias said it was very important to build the unity of the working class against oppression, as the Sri Lankan ruling class was notorious for dividing the working class along racial lines.



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