

Sri Lankans in New Zealand join global protests against Rajapakse government

Tom Peters
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Over the last two weeks, protests have been held in cities and towns across New Zealand by the Sri Lankan community in solidarity with workers, students, farmers and others who are holding mass demonstrations in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has been hard hit by the global economic and social crisis made worse by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. With most of the island's population already living in poverty, the rapid surge in the cost of food, fuel and other basic necessities prompted masses of people to take to the streets to demand the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) has issued a statement supporting this demand and calling for the abolition of the executive presidency, an end to austerity and starvation, and for action committees of workers to fight for a socialist program to secure food, fuel and medicines for all.

Throughout the world, Sri Lankans are protesting to draw attention to the crisis. In New Zealand, which is home to a Sri Lankan community of about 16,000 people, rallies were organised in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington, as well as the regional centres of Tauranga, Nelson, Palmerston North and Invercargill.

Protesters denounced the Rajapakse government, calling on the President to "go home." Many placards drew attention to the government's attempt to shut down social media channels. "Please undo the social media ban, we need to call our parents," said one handwritten message. "Say NO to dictatorship in Sri Lanka," said another.

Slogans at the Auckland rally included "End Oligarchy," "Save Sri Lanka from the gang of political looters," and "Protect Sri Lanka from 225+1 corrupted

politicians." All 225 members of parliament are widely viewed as complicit in the disastrous levels of social inequality, corruption and attacks on democratic rights in Sri Lanka.

Madushan, a healthcare worker who has lived in New Zealand for three and a half years with his wife and children, joined the Wellington rally on Saturday. He told the WSWs that he was calling relatives in Sri Lanka frequently to get updates on the protests.

Madushan said "the Rajapakse regime stole lots of money from the people for their own pockets." This was not a new situation but had been happening for more than a decade. In 2011, the same politicians "tried to loot" the country's Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), which was meant to pay for pensions.

When workers protested on May 30, 2011 in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone, several were shot by police. Madushan's brother, Roshen, was killed at the age of 21. "The police did not allow my brother to go to the hospital for two hours; he was bleeding, and died," Madushan said. The WSWs wrote at the time about the killing, which sparked outrage in the working class; tens of thousands of people attended Roshen's funeral (see: "Thousands attend funeral of slain Sri Lankan FTZ worker").

Eleven years later, the government was again "trying to use the army and police power against normal people," Madushan said. He added that "they try to separate Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamil, by racism," but this strategy was no longer working. In the current protests, all ethnic and religious groups were standing together against the regime. He also stressed that "people are not believing any political parties, any trade unions," and that none of these organisations were leading the protests.

“The main thing, for Sri Lankan people, is they don’t have electricity, they don’t have gas, they don’t have enough food to eat,” Madushan explained. There have been power cuts for more than 12 hours a day, as well as a shortage of milk powder and baby formula, a lack of fertilizer for farming, long queues for petrol, and no funds to purchase food from other countries.

When the government came to power in 2019, “the price for a 12.5kg LP gas cylinder was 1,400 rupees, now it is R 5,400.” People use the cylinders every day for cooking. The value of the currency has collapsed. One New Zealand dollar is now equal to 210 rupees; in 2018 it was 115 rupees.

Commenting on the pandemic in Sri Lanka, Madushan said the government “are trying to minimise the number of cases and the number of deaths.” He pointed out that there was a lack of testing. Sri Lanka has reported just nine deaths and just 674 cases of COVID-19 in the last seven days.

Dinesh, an agricultural worker who took part in the Invercargill protest over the weekend, also told the WSWs that the “Rajapakse regime” had “stolen” the people’s money and was exercising “military control” over the country. He blamed the government’s economic mismanagement for the inflation crisis and shortages.

“The majority of Sri Lankans have medium income and low income, so they are struggling, and some essentials are not available,” Dinesh explained. Asked about the protesters’ main demand, he said “the president’s constitutional power should be moved to parliament,” because currently he was akin to a “dictator.”

A petition organised by the New Zealand-Sri Lankan community group Duality is calling on the Labour Party-led government to condemn the Rajapakse government’s human rights abuses, provide humanitarian aid and offer greater support for Sri Lankans seeking to migrate to New Zealand.

New Zealand exports more than \$400 million worth of dairy products to Sri Lanka each year and is seeking to strengthen relations with the Rajapakse government. Last year, the Ardern government opened a new High Commission in Colombo.

Asked about her response to the crisis during a media conference on April 7, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern replied evasively that it was a “tumultuous time

politically and domestically in Sri Lanka” and she was monitoring the situation. Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta issued a statement to *One News* calling on “all parties in Sri Lanka to continue to work to find a peaceful solution through dialogue, exchange and democratic processes.” Both statements avoided any actual criticism of the Rajapakse government.



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