

Sri Lankan SEP rally in Jaffna in support of anti-government protests urges workers build action committees

Our reporters
15 April 2022

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), and Northern Province Fishermen Action Committee held a powerful picket and rally April 12 in Jaffna, the capital of Sri Lanka's Northern Province, to support the ongoing mass movement against President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his capitalist government and fight to mobilise the working class on a socialist action programme.

Central to this programme of democratic and anti-capitalist demands—such as the abolition of the authoritarian executive presidency, opposition to IMF austerity, and the establishment of workers' control over the distribution of essential goods so as to ensure adequate food, fuel and medicine for all—is the call for workers to build action committees in all workplaces and neighbourhoods. By mobilising the social power of the working class, these committees will enable it to rally the rural poor behind it in the struggle to ensure the socioeconomic crisis now ravaging the island is resolved at the expense of big business and the rich, not working people.

The US-NATO war against Russia has exacerbated an already disastrous economic situation, driving up the price of essentials and depleting Sri Lanka's foreign reserves to the point that it cannot import basic foods and medicines, cooking gas and fuel.

The Rajapakse government, along with the opposition parties, is seeking a \$4 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund vultures. It is determined to impose savage IMF austerity measures that will place the full burden of the economic crisis on Sri Lanka's workers and toilers, threatening them with unprecedented deprivation, hunger and even starvation.

As a result of this intolerable situation, a mass movement demanding the immediate resignation of Rajapakse and his government has erupted. It has developed entirely outside the opposition parties and the trade unions, which have systematically suppressed the class struggle.

The anti-government protests have rapidly developed in all parts of the country, including in the majority Tamil north and east, demonstrating the objective unity and common interests of all workers on the island, Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim.

Northeastern Sri Lanka, which was devastated by the anti-Tamil communal war waged by successive Colombo governments, is suffering intensely from the current economic crisis.

In this desperate situation, the SEP's picket and rally calling for

the working class to advance its own programme based on its essential needs, not what the capitalist politicians claim is "affordable," won a powerful response.

Workers, fishermen, farmers and SEP/IYSSE members participated in the picket line. "Bring down the Rajapakse government; Abolish the executive presidency along with repressive anti-working class laws; Build Workers Action Committees; No to hunger and austerity; Ensure foods, fuel and medicines for all; Repudiate all the foreign debts" were the slogans chanted by the pickets.

The SEP/IYSSE campaigners distributed the party statement issued April 7. It declared: "The Socialist Equality Party stands squarely behind the demands of working people: 'Gota has got to go!' But what is to replace him? It is not enough to demand Rajapakse's removal. He is only the present-day ugly face of a corrupt and reactionary presidential state system that is organised to secure the wealth and interests of the capitalist class and perpetuate the exploitation and impoverishment of the workers and peasants throughout the island."

Several Jaffna-based media covered the April 12 SEP/IYSSE protest, including Shakthi TV and Samuham media.

The event was carried out under the surveillance of police intelligence agents who stayed throughout and recorded it in its entirety. Even 12 years after the end of the civil war, the North and Eastern provinces are still under military occupation and civil activists and other government opponents are often targeted under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Representatives of the Fishermen's Action Committee, IYSSE and SEP addressed the picket line.

T. Sampanthan, an SEP Political Committee member, noted that Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the president's elder brother, had delivered a speech the day before in which he threatened the protesters indirectly with blood, by referring to the Sri Lankan capitalist state's criminal record of bloodily suppressing youth protests in 1988-90 and the 26 years of civil war.

"The Rajapakse government," said Sampanthan, "is determined to go ahead with the IMF austerity programme, backed by military and police repression. All the other capitalist parties, be it the official opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB, United People Power), the SLFP, JVP, UNP or the Tamil capitalist parties, are maintaining a pose of passive hostility to the protests. This is

because they fear the unification of Sinhala and Tamil working people on a common social basis, and are in fundamental agreement that harsh austerity measures, targeting the social and democratic rights of working people, have to be implemented. To that end, they act very nervously, trying to divert the mass movement into supporting the coming to power of an interim capitalist government and other manoeuvres.”

Sampanthan stressed that the political question the mass movement now faces is who will come to power next. “After bringing down the Rajapakse regime, the working class and the oppressed masses can’t allow another capitalist government. Only the working class can advance a program against the IMF austerity. The first step towards this programme is building action committees in every factory, workplace and working class neighbourhood”

The SEP-IYSSE picket was held in front of the main bus terminal in Jaffna. Sri Lanka Transport Board workers observing it expressed their agreement with the SEP’s programme. “We have decade-long wage increase demands,” they explained. “There are a lot of workers without job permanency. Some of them have worked more than a decade with no rights and less salary.”

The bus workers continued, “With the current cost of living we can no longer get by. When we are enrolling for the job we have to get the membership in the union that belongs to the ruling party. Now our mouths are shut with the Essential Public Services Orders (which ban strikes). These unions do not do anything for the workers.”

Avishka, a Uva Wellassa University student, expressed opposition to the austerity measures. “April 4, we also held a protest against President Rajapakse in front of the university. We cannot afford our meals in the university canteen anymore.”

“I am coming from a working class family,” continued Avishka. “My father was a water board worker. I do not see any improvement in our social conditions. We have two acres of paddy fields which normally yield 80 sacks of rice. Without fertilizers (the government has banned their import to save foreign currency) this time it was just 32. The government represents the interest of tiny layers of big business like Dilith Jayaweera.”

Avishka said that he does not believe the promises made by the SJB. “I have not forgotten that they were also ruthlessly implementing an IMF programme when they were in power. All the other parties supported Sirisena’s government.”

Siva, a fisherman, said that he had lived in Pudukudiruppu, Mulativu when the final battles of the Sri Lankan civil war took place. “It is a miracle that today I live without any disability,” he explained. “I experienced the most horrible and continuous shell attacks, to which we had already become accustomed under (the previous) Chandrika Kumaratunga government. All our family members hid in separate underground 2-by-2 feet bunkers.”

He added: “People who ordered these atrocities will not be sensitive to hunger and people dying without medicines.”

“I have participated in a previous SEP public meeting,” said Siva, “and listened to comrade Wijie Dias (the SEP general secretary). I reject both the LTTE’s separatism and the Colombo governments’ Sinhala chauvinism. It is really important that you teach the masses the historical roots of the racial discrimination

against Tamils and work to unify the working class.”

Sarojiny, a 56-year-old woman, approached the pickets. “Firstly,” she said, “I want to say that I support your party’s protests because you tell the real problems that we face severely. I am a day-wage labourer from Nellyyady. After the COVID-19 pandemic it is really hard to find a job. Now I almost do not have a source of income. The prices of everything are going higher than ever. It is difficult for us to live. Many people like us are facing this economic hardship.”

“We are struggling,” continued Sarojiny, “to get even one meal. With no cooking gas, searching for firewood is another big problem. Bread prices have also affected us because we depend on this mostly as breakfast. I have been living without a proper house. Every government is playing with the housing question to deceive us.”

“No parliamentarians are concerned with our problems,” observed Sarojiny, “even the Tamil parties are not concerned with our plight.”

Ranjan, a private security officer, said: “Even though I am 62, I have to go to work because my family has eight members. The government has abandoned us. We don’t know how to manage these price increases, food shortages. We are all facing one common problem as workers, we have no ethnic, racial, language differences—we are all the same.”

During the campaign for the picket, a government hospital pharmacist spoke out against the shortage of essential medicines, adding the government is culpable. “This is very dangerous. We cannot import medicines. You cannot even buy them for a higher price.

“If we are not going to procure vital medicines, we are approaching a catastrophe. We will have to witness patients dying in front of our very eyes. I for one am not ready to witness such a situation inactively.”

The hospital pharmacist agreed with our demand that foreign debt must be repudiated. “Your statement says ‘Instead of the \$US7 billion due this year flowing into the coffers of the international banks, it should be used to pay for the food, fuel, medicines and other essential goods needed by working people.’ This is a very practical solution to the medicine shortages.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact