

Critical political issues facing anti-government protests in Sri Lanka

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Mass protests in Sri Lanka demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government have entered a critical stage. Thousands have been participating daily in continuous protests at Galle Face Green in central Colombo since April 9, staying in that main protest site day and night.

Working people, youths, professionals, rural poor and housewives are participating, cutting across all ethnic and religious lines—Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Christian—amid vicious attempts by the Rajapakse government and its supporters to whip up communalism to drive a wedge into the working class and oppressed masses.

The occupation at Galle Face Green is part of far broader protests by working people throughout the island, driven by skyrocketing prices, shortages of essentials including food, fuel and medicine, and lengthy daily power outages.

It is, however, a politically amorphous movement, unified around the slogan “Gota go home” and the necessity that something has to be done about the island’s social and economic disaster. Moreover, the entry of the working class into this movement as a class with its own demands has been blocked by the trade unions beyond isolated and limited actions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that this situation will not continue indefinitely. Last week Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse issued thinly-veiled threats of a bloody crackdown on the protest movement. On Tuesday, police fired on demonstrators in Rambukkana, killing Chaminda Lakshan and wounding others.

These threats are going hand-in-hand with attempts to woo protest leaders. The prime minister invited those camped on Galle Face Green for talks “to hear their thoughts and complaints” and “to discuss any possible, plausible courses of action for the sake of Lanka.”

Galle Face protest organisers rejected Rajapakse’s offer, but their list of demands, prominently displayed in the protest site and circulated in social media, are directed to a reshuffling of the government, minor constitutional reforms and the implementation of IMF austerity, which will impose even greater hardships on working people.

The same group insists that there must be “no politics” at the Galle Face protests. This slogan appeals to the widespread hostility felt by workers and youth towards the entire political establishment, including the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). It is reflected in the popular chant: “No to the 225 in parliament”—that is, to all 225

parliamentarians.

However, the demands being promoted by the Galle Face protest leaders have a definite political content. While proclaiming “no politics,” their demands are virtually identical to those of the SJB and JVP and remain entirely within the framework of the parliamentary set-up and the profit system. The slogan of “no politics” is above all aimed against socialist politics.

What are these demands?

The resignation of the president and prime minister, no Rajapakse family member to hold a parliamentary seat, and take legal action to retake the resources “plundered by corrupted members of Rajapakse family, corrupted politicians and officials.”

The protest leaders blame the current unprecedented crisis on the corruption of politicians, ignoring the economic turmoil that is racking global capitalism and countries around the world. The developing crisis of the world capitalist economy has been accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the criminal “herd immunity” policies of governments, including in Sri Lanka, and now the US/NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The entire political establishment has been mired in corruption since independence in 1948. Taking legal action against corrupt politicians and officials to recover some of their loot will do nothing to resolve the economic and social disaster facing working people.

An interim government for six months to prepare parliamentary and presidential elections.

What parties would form such an interim government? It would be principally the SJB and JVP together with other opposition parties, but the protest leaders leave open the door to government politicians joining, as long as they are not Rajapakse family members.

Such a government would implement the same basic policies as the current government: drastic austerity measures which will dramatically worsen as a result of any IMF bailout. The SJB and the United National Party (UNP) have criticised the government for not going with a begging bowl to the IMF earlier. The JVP has maintained a guilty silence on the subject, indicating its support.

This would be a government to defend the interests of the wealthy, foreign creditors and corporate elite at the expense of workers, young people and the urban and rural poor. Moreover, it is a desperate attempt to buy time for the ruling class by directing opposition into elections in six months.

The working class cannot afford to wait for six months, it needs the organisational and political means to fight to resolve the social catastrophe it confronts. That necessarily involves a political struggle against all the establishment parties—government and opposition—and the profit system that they defend.

“Re-empowerment of 19th amendment” to the constitution.

The 19th constitutional amendment, enacted under the national “unity” government headed by Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2015 and overturned by the current Rajapakse government, did not abolish the executive presidency, as had been promised, but placed several minor limits to the president’s powers.

With or without the 19th amendment, the executive president has sweeping autocratic powers including to impose a state of emergency and to mobilise the security forces against the working class as Rajapakse has done already.

The SEP demands that the executive presidency must be abolished along with the raft of anti-democratic laws that have been used against workers repeatedly in the past.

The interim government to bring “essential services and other special sectors facing the crisis (health, education etc.) to proper conditions.”

To suggest that an interim government is going to ameliorate the social crisis facing millions is duplicitous. An interim government is going to implement the demands of the IMF, foreign creditors and the Sri Lankan corporate elite for more austerity, not less.

The demands do not include even a reference to immense hardships of working people who struggle to feed their families and access the necessities of daily life. The hospitals face critical shortages of medicines and equipment. Farmers cannot get chemical fertilisers. Transport and power supplies are being crippled by fuel shortages.

We warn that an interim government will be no less ruthless than the current regime in imposing the IMF’s diktats and will not hesitate to mobilise the security forces against the protest movement.

The demands advanced by the Galle Face Green protest leaders do not represent the interests of the working class and the poor, but rather an upper middle-class layer that is placing its hopes in the IMF and the capitalist opposition parties to improve its, relatively speaking, comfortable position.

Their class orientation is not to the working class, but to the banks and big business. The *Daily FT.lk* in Sri Lanka has reported that the “Advocates of Occupy Galle Face (OGF)” have appealed to the private sector to back its demands. They call for statements of support for the OGF, a commitment “to help with logistics at the Galle Face with clear branding,” visits to the protest site “with company banners or visual optics,” and for companies to encourage and provide the opportunity for “employees to protest outside office premises.”

Against the pro-business orientation of the opposition parties, the

SEP has elaborated a socialist program of action for the working class. In its April 7 statement, the SEP made clear that it stands squarely behind the demands of working people for the resignation of Rajapakse and his government, but explained that was only the first step. It called for “the immediate abolition of the executive presidency, which, with its sweeping autocratic powers, holds a gun to the heads of the working class.”

The SEP has already formed a number of action committees, independent of all the parties of the bourgeoisie and the trade unions that have straitjacketed the working class and sold out one dispute after another. We urge workers to establish their own action committees, democratically elected, in every factory, workplace, plantation and neighbourhood as the organisational basis for a political struggle to defend their basic democratic and social rights.

The SEP statement proposed a series of policies around which action committees could fight, including the repudiation of the foreign debt and no to the austerity demands of the IMF and World Bank. To meet the pressing needs of the masses, the working class needs to take over the control of the production and distribution of the essential items and resources critical to the lives of working people.

Such a movement of the working class would win the support of the oppressed masses, including the rural poor, and lay the basis for a fight for a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies. The allies of Sri Lankan workers are their class brothers and sisters throughout South Asia and around the world who also confront a worsening social crisis. The fight for a socialist future is necessarily an international one.

We urge workers and youth to join and build the SEP as the revolutionary leadership necessarily for this struggle.



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