Sri Lankan SEP/IYSSE holds powerful demonstration advocating a socialist program for the anti-government protests

Our reporters
22 April 2022

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful rally of over 150 people in downtown Colombo outside the Fort railway station on Thursday afternoon. The event was in support of the ongoing mass protest movement against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, but went further, advancing a socialist program of action for the working class to defend its social and democratic rights.

The demonstration included workers, students, youth, professionals and housewives, as well as SEP and IYSSE members and supporters. Members of several action committees participated, including the Health Workers Action Committee, the Teachers-Parents-Students Safety Committee, the Action Committee for the Defence of the Freedom of Art and Expression, and the Plantation Workers Action Committees.

A delegation of party members and supporters, including youth, travelled 400 kilometres from Jaffna in the war-ravaged north of the island to attend the event, which was broadcast live on the SEP's Facebook page and the action committees' Facebook pages.

The main slogans were "Abolish the executive presidency," "Defeat the IMF austerity measures" and "Build workers' action committees." Other slogans that were chanted included, "Repudiate the foreign debt with the support of the international working class," "Immediately reduce the prices of milk powder, fuel and gas," "Fight for a sliding scale of wages," "Stop the NATO war against Russia," "Build the ICFI" and "Join the International Online May Day Rally."

SEP and IYSSE members have intervened continuously in the anti-government protests at Galle Face Green and in other parts of the country, discussing the party's international socialist program. Several people met during these interventions joined Thursday's SEP rally, which won the attention of thousands of workers and youth returning from their jobs and studies. Campaigners distributed copies of the SEP's April 7 statement to passing pedestrians.

SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena addressed the rally. His speech in Sinhala was translated into Tamil. "We support the mass movement that demands 'Gota must go home,' but we do not stop at that slogan. We have developed a perspective and program on what to do next after bringing down the Rajapakse government," he said.

The leadership of Galle Face protest movement, which has evolved around "Go Home Gota," he explained, is heavily influenced by the politics of bourgeois opposition parties, mainly the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the United National Party (UNP). They are all seeking "solutions" to the crisis on the basis of an IMF debt restructuring program, he said.

"The SJB's main criticism of the government is that it didn't go to the IMF earlier. The UNP supports the decision [to go the IMF] wholeheartedly," Wijesiriwardena said.

He also drew attention to the JVP's notorious record of alliances with traditional bourgeois parties, such as the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the UNP, to prop up bourgeois rule. "The JVP supports the turn to the IMF and is maintaining a silence over this," he said.

The speaker explained that the IMF program would see even heavier social attacks on the working class.

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“These attacks are already being implemented. The governor of the Central Bank, Nandalal Weerasinghe, increased interest rates in an attempt to control inflation. This will reduce production and increase unemployment,” he continued.

“The government and all these parties call for political stability—i.e., no protests, pickets or strikes--as a prerequisite for the IMF program. The day before yesterday an unarmed civilian [Chaminda Lakshan], who had waited days in a fuel pumping station to get fuel for his vehicles, was shot dead by a heavily armed police battalion. This is a signal by the government to global capital that it is ready to answer the protests and strikes with bullets. This is a warning to the Galle Face movement as well.”

Wijesiriwardena refuted claims that the economic crisis in Sri Lanka was created simply by the Rajapakse family’s nepotism and corruption.

“This crisis is an integral part of the advanced breakdown of global capitalism after the 2008 global financial crisis. This process has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, which threatens to evolve into a nuclear world war,” he said.

The worsening economic breakdown, he continued, is creating universal social disaster all over the world, leading to strikes and protests by workers globally. “This provides the objective basis for the unification of the working class internationally against this social misery,” Wijesiriwardena said.

“We cannot reduce this social crisis merely to something specific to Sri Lanka or to be solved by eradicating corruption, which is inherent to capitalism itself. The way out of the crisis is for the working class to take power with the support of the farmers. For that, the working class needs to build its own action committees to exercise political power. In these action committees [rank-and-file committees] workers will make decisions democratically,” he said.

Wijesiriwardena explained the necessity for Sri Lankan workers to align themselves with the International Workers Alliances of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to unify the international working class. He concluded by calling on all in attendance to participate in the International May Day Online Rally sponsored by the ICFI and the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the SEP to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Following the event SEP and IYSSE campaigners spoke with some of those in attendance.

A Sri Lanka Telecom worker who watched the rally said: “Before seeing this event and talking to you, I thought it was only in Sri Lanka that the price of essentials was getting so high. Now I understand that the conditions facing workers, whichever country they live in, are the same and unbearable.”

A Sri Lanka Fisheries Corporation worker said: “I’m fed up with these [existing] politics. Inflation is so high that you can’t make ends meet with a monthly salary of 30,000 to 40,000 rupees [$US100–$US133]. Even though some parties call themselves an ‘opposition,’ there are no [genuine] opposition parties. All of them follow the same track. I did political science for my advanced level so I understand what is happening in the political terrain. I’d like to read your statement because I’m trying to find a real opposition to the current system.”

Kevin, a youth, said he fully agreed with the SEP’s demand for the repudiation of all foreign debt. “These foreign loans are not borrowed for our benefit; they’re for the big capitalists,” he said. “We should not have to pay any price for the devastation this has caused. I only came to this conclusion after listening to your slogans.”

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