

Sri Lankan big business demands a “bipartisan national government”

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The crisis of the Sri Lankan government deepened as big business this week demanded immediate measures to end the country’s economic, social and political turmoil, including the formation of national unity government.

The corporate and financial elite are fearful of the revolutionary implications of the mass protest movement that has convulsed the country, with major sections of the working class showing signs of taking up the demand for the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. The brutal police shooting of unarmed protesters in Rambukkana on Tuesday that killed a poor workingman has further enraged the masses.

On Wednesday, all big business lobbies, including the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Sri Lanka, wrote to the president requesting that he immediately initiate legislative action to repeal the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, saying it “contributed to the present situation.”

The 20th amendment enacted in October 2020 reinstated all of the sweeping draconian powers of the executive presidency, and, among other things, transformed the parliament into nothing more than a rubber stamp.

The big business chambers expressed the fear “that the current political deadlock coupled with growing public unrest could potentially derail the actions being taken to resolve the serious economic crisis” of the country. Repealing the 20th Amendment had to be combined with a “consensual approach.”

The letter stated: “We recommend that a bipartisan national government is established... to come out of the current economic crisis” and “resolve the issues relating to fuel, electricity, gas and other critical elements of the supply chain.”

Sri Lanka’s major conglomerates--Brandix, MAS, Hemas, Dialog, Dilmah, John Keels--yesterday wrote separately to the president, calling for “swift changes to [establish a] good governing system.”

The unprecedented direct intervention of big business does not express one iota of concern for the plight of working

people. The corporate and financial elite has amassed huge profits during the COVID-19 pandemic while insisting on a policy of herd immunity, which has allowed the virus to ravage the island.

The ruling class fears that unless the protests are brought rapidly to an end, a far broader political movement will erupt once talks currently underway with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout package conclude, revealing the extent of the austerity measures required.

In talks with Sri Lanka, the IMF has demanded “adequate assurances” that the country’s debts can be put on a sustainable path. This means deep cuts in government expenditure, increased taxes and the extensive restructuring of state-owned enterprises, among other things.

Rajapakse knows such measures cannot be implemented peacefully. Both the president and his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, have blamed protesters for the police shooting on Tuesday in Rambukkana. Yesterday, the president renewed his order for the military to maintain law and order in 25 of the country’s districts.

The mass protests against the Rajapakse regime are growing. They have continued for more than two weeks, driven by rampant inflation and shortages of food, medicines and other essentials such as fuel and electricity.

Workers have participated in the protests as individuals. However, they are now pressing for industrial action for wage hikes and other measures to alleviate the social catastrophe they are confronting.

To deflect the groundswell of opposition, the trade unions have been forced to call limited protests and strikes.

On Tuesday, tens of thousands of workers took part in protest demonstrations in Colombo and other major cities. They demanded an immediate wage increase, an end to shortages and a reduction of prices, and they branded the IMF talks as a trap.

About 1,500 workers, including teachers, health, port, electricity, telecom and postal employees, demonstrated outside the Fort railway station. On the same day, teachers at all universities went on strike and thousands marched in

Colombo opposing the government.

On Thursday, about 150 plantation workers at the Gartmore Estate held a demonstration and marched to nearby Maskeliya town. They chanted slogans against the police shooting in Rambukkana and the huge price hikes. The previous day, Maskeliya Alton Estate workers held a similar demonstration, and yesterday Agarapatana workers took protest action.

On April 25, public school teachers will engage in a one-day sick leave strike, opposing the skyrocketing price of fuel and shortages. The same unions that organised Tuesday's large protests have announced a one-day general strike to be held on April 28, which will involve up to one million workers.

Far from seeking to build the opposition movement against the government, the trade unions are seeking to contain the anger of workers. The unions that called the latest protests have betrayed every struggle that erupted over the past year, enabling the government to impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis on workers and the poor.

Having lost the confidence of big business, the ruling coalition is falling into further disarray. Yesterday, the newly appointed media minister, Nalaka Godahewa, offered his resignation and called for an interim government. President Rajapakse refused to accept the resignation.

Thirteen of the ruling party's parliamentarians met this week with the president and called for an interim government under a new prime minister. In a meeting of government MPs, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the president's brother, insisted that the present government would continue and try to find solutions to the economic crisis.

The opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—are also desperate to bring the mass protest movement under control. In a bid to tap into the popular opposition, SJB leader Sajith Premadasa submitted proposals on Thursday to the parliamentary speaker to abolish the executive presidency. However, his deputy, former army commander Sarath Fonseka, told the media that abolishing the executive presidency would solve nothing.

The JVP completed its three-day march to Colombo, which involved thousands. JVP speakers addressed the crowd, demanding that the Rajapakse government go. But they did not explain what the JVP proposed next. Over the past month, the JVP has been campaigning for an “interim government” and new elections. Any government involving the SJB and JVP would, like the current one, impose the IMF's austerity agenda on working people.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that the Rajapakse regime, although weakened, will stop at nothing,

including brutal police state measures, to impose the IMF's dictates. That is why the SEP has called for the immediate and complete abolition of the executive presidency, along with all anti-democratic laws that have been used time and again against working people.

The working class needs its own organisations to fight to defend its basic democratic and social rights. The trade unions are not only limiting the struggle of workers, but trying to tie them to the call by the SJB and JVP for an “interim government”—in line with the appeals of big business.

The SEP calls for action committees to be established by workers in every workplace, factory and neighbourhood, elected democratically and independent of the trade unions and every capitalist party.

Such action committees can rally other oppressed people and the poor who have come into struggle and are seeking a solution to the social calamity they face. In this struggle, workers can turn to their class brothers and sisters in every country who confront a similar social disaster.

The SEP advances a socialist solution to the crisis. That involves nationalising all the large estates, big companies and banks under workers' control and reorganising the economy for the benefit of the majority of society, not the wealthy few. The establishment of action committees lays the basis for the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement this socialist program.

We urge workers and youth to join the SEP and fight for this socialist program of action.



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