

Sri Lankan SEP/IYSSE meeting discusses socialist program needed to advance mass anti-government struggle

Our correspondents

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a lively online meeting on April 24 entitled “A socialist program for the mass struggles.”

Prior to the meeting, SEP/IYSSE members and supporters campaigned among workers, students and youth active in the wave of anti-government protests and on April 21 held their own 150-strong demonstration in downtown Colombo.

The online event, which was addressed by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, Assistant National Secretary Deepal Jayasekera and several SEP Political Committee members, was watched by about 70 people on ZOOM and several dozen others on the party’s Facebook page. The video has so far been viewed by over 1,500 people with 200 others sharing it.

SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena, who chaired the meeting, began by explaining the global context of the escalating economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka. The intolerable increases in the cost of living triggered by the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, he said, had produced a massive wave of working-class protests throughout the world.

“The SEP fully supports the ongoing mass protest movement against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government but going further, we are advancing a socialist program of action for the working class to defend its social and democratic rights,” he said.

Wijesiriwardena initiated the discussion by asking SEP speakers various questions about the party’s political perspective and program.

SEP Assistant National Secretary Deepal Jayasekera answered the first question, which was about the government and opposition responses to the mass nationwide protests.

Jayasekera explained that the government, the opposition parties and the pseudo-lefts organisations were all terrified of the growing popular uprising against the Rajapakse government. “They all fear that this will grow into a movement that challenges bourgeois rule as a whole,” he said.

Jayasekera referred to the recent violent police repression against thousands of people in Rambukkana protesting fuel price hikes. The attack which killed one protester, he said, was to assure the IMF and global bankers that the government is ready to implement the harsh austerity being dictated in the recent negotiations and

brutally suppressing any popular opposition.

The speaker explained how the opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya, the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—were attempting to dismantle this growing mass movement by attempting to divert it into an alternative capitalist regime in the form of an interim government.

“The response of the government and other bourgeois parties to this mass uprising indicates the serious dangers now confronting the mass movement amid preparations for repression being made by the bourgeois state. The lack of a clear political perspective and program in this movement to fight the Rajapakse government intensifies this danger,” the speaker said.

The next speaker, Saman Gunadasa, elaborated on the party’s call for the nationalisation of the major economic centres, seizure of the wealth of the billionaires and repudiation of foreign debt as a necessary socialist response to the economic crisis.

Gunadasa pointed out how bourgeois governments have paid billions of dollars, created through export of goods produced by workers, on loan installments to global bankers. This transfer of wealth extracted from the working class into the pockets of billionaires, he said, has led to huge social inequality where the ten wealthiest billionaires on the planet now owned more wealth than the poorest 3.1 billion people in the world.

“This directly points to the necessity for the nationalisation of all large plantations, the major corporations and the banks under workers’ control, seizure of the wealth of the richest, and refusal of paying the foreign debt for which the working class is not responsible.”

Speaking next, Prageeth Aravinda explained the SEP’s political program now required to take forward the mass anti-government uprising.

The bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka had completely failed to meet any of the burning social needs of workers and the poor, and will not risk any loss in profits, he said. “They are not prepared to meet the demands of the working class and will not change course, irrespective of pressure from workers or the oppressed,” he said.

Aravinda said that the working class could only fight for its own interests by forming its own organizations—action committees—independent of all sections of the bourgeoisie and the trade unions and the pseudo-left. He ended his contribution by referencing the basic demands elaborated in the SEP’s April 7

statement.

Vilani Peiris explained why the SEP called for the cancellation of all the debts of poor and marginal farmers and small-business holders, and for the reinstatement of all subsidies, including fertilizer.

“Farmers have had to face unprecedented difficulties as a result of the Rajapakse government’s import ban on chemical fertilizer and agricultural chemicals,” she said. “The farmers are continuing their struggles and are now accompanied by the struggles of workers, youths and other oppressed.”

Peiris explained that only the working class had the historic potential to resolve the problems facing farmers and other small business holders, adding: “The working class needs to take the lead in building a workers’ and peasants’ government on an international socialist program.”

Kapila Fernando pointed out why the SEP demanded guaranteed jobs for all, with decent and safe working conditions and the indexing of wages to the cost of living.

“The IMF’s forthcoming dictates will trigger a sharp collapse in employment and working conditions in both the public and private sectors,” he said, and referred to the government and company cuts to wages and jobs in response to COVID-19.

These attacks, he explained, were fully supported by the unions, which will play a similar reactionary role in implementing IMF austerity measures. “The workers’ major task in countering these attacks is to break from the trade unions, form their own action committees and fight for the international unity of the working class,” he said.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias made the concluding remarks to the meeting, pointing out that the mass protests against the Rajapakse government were “not an accident.” This struggle is “a result of a social crisis, which has been historically prepared and reached the level of an explosion,” he said.

These eruptions, whether in Sri Lanka, India, or Tunisia in North Africa, or Peru in Latin America, Dias continued, “are a vindication of the ICFI analysis that 2020 opened a decade of socialist revolution.”

Dias pointed out that the meeting had attracted participants from around the world, including those who did not understand Sinhala or Tamil.

He referred to a quote from Lenin posted in the meeting chat by a participant from Norway. “It is not enough to be a revolutionary and an adherent of socialism or a communist in general. You must be able at each particular moment to find the particular link in the chain which you must grasp with all your might in order to hold the whole chain and to prepare firmly for the transition to the next link.”

The participant then asked: “What is the particular link in the chain that should be grasped today?”

Dias answered by explaining that the mass struggles that had emerged in Sri Lanka over shortages and skyrocketing prices of essentials “is the particular link we must grasp at this moment.”

The SEP, he continued, “has been continuously explaining very decisive political issues in relation to that link” through our April 7 party statement and further elaborated in articles published in the WSWWS on a daily basis.

The essential content of the main political slogans in the mass protests—“Gota go” and “the government go,” “End to the curse of 74-year rule,” “Abolition of executive presidency” and “No to all 225 members in the parliament”—is that the capitalist system must be abolished, Dias said.

There was, however, he continued, a lack of understanding within the popular movement about the crucial political issues—the nature of the capitalist system as a world system, the alternative to bourgeois rule and the parliamentary system, and international character of the solution to this crisis.

“The entire efforts by the SEP and the IYSSE, including at this meeting,” he said, “are taking these issues as the link to be grasped in this popular struggle and developing a discussion among workers, youths and intellectuals on the solution for these questions.”

Dias stressed that workers and youth had to draw on the historical lessons of the class struggle. He speaker provided a brief overview of so-called independence in Sri Lanka in 1948, including principled position taken by the then-Trotskyist Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) against the formation of a bourgeois state and parliamentary system in 1947–48. These principles, he said, were betrayed by adapting to nationalism and parliamentarianism.

Dias explained that restoration of these Trotskyist foundations was established in founding of the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the SEP, in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The SEP, he said, “embodies the fundamental lessons of the last century’s class struggles, including the 74-year experiences on this island with the capitalist system, which is now being cursed by workers, youths, students, artists, peasantry, minorities and other oppressed people.”

Dias concluded his remarks by appealing to all participants to join the SEP and take forward the fight to build it as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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